

NATURE AND THE PAINTED LANDSCAPE

by

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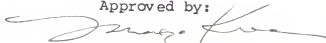
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NATURE AND THE PAINTED LANDSCAPE

I. INTRODUCTION

The landscape has held attraction for American artists ever since the founding of the earliest settlements and it continues to interest artists today. As a landscape painter, I am interested in different ways artists have portrayed their environment. Among the many ways to view the natural world, two are of particular interest to me. One is to seek objectivity by rendering the landscape as realistically as possible. The other approach implicitly doubts that objectivity is attainable, emphasizing instead a subjective interpretation of the landscape based on personal, mystical, or religious experiences. Because of my interest in these two different approaches used in landscape painting, I also have developed an interest in two artists each of whom approaches the subject differently.

This paper examines the works of Fairfield Porter and Georgia O'Keeffe as exponents of these alternative attitudes toward landscape painting. Each of these artists painted many different subjects, but I am focusing only on their landscape paintings. Porter saw landscape as an objective external reality which could be recorded faithfully, while O'Keeffe used landscape as a symbolic extension and metaphor for her inner feelings. According to Alexander Eliot, "Every

great painting shows something seen plus something seen into: it brings sight and insight together."1 With this as my premise, I will analyze the works of these two painters and through the process develop a better understanding of my work.

II. ATTITUDES TOWARD NATURE

It is virtually impossible for an artist simply to copy nature since perception is, itself, not entirely objective and quantifiable. E. H. Gombrich noted: "What we 'see' is not simply given, but is the product of past experience and future expectations."2 Some artists, such as Porter, try to be literal, others, like O'Keeffe, deliberately base their work on personal interpretation. While Gombrich noted that we can never be entirely objective nor entirely subjective for that matter, it is the artist's personal response to nature which may more readily foster the creation of a unique style.

Literal Interpretation

Of the two attitudes mentioned, Fairfield Porter best represents the objectivist view of literal interpretation. Porter perceived nature as having value of its own. He felt that nature was intrinsically "artistic" and did not need to be changed in order to be improved. Rackstraw Downs went on to explain, "He [Porter] would never return to a site to finish a landscape painting because the light would never

be the same."³ His compositions were never arranged. Forms in his paintings were placed in the same location as in their original environment. His main concern was painting what already existed in nature. Porter sought to represent nature as he experienced it in his immediate environment and for his subject matter, he chose his yard, his neighborhood, and areas around where he lived--landscapes with which he was intimately familiar. John Ashbery holds that Porter felt "the whole point was to put down what was there wherever he happened to be not with approval but with respect."⁴ For example, his landscape paintings "View of the Barred Islands" (1970) and "Island Farmhouse" (1969) were actual places in Maine. One could probably stand on the same spot as Porter once did and see the same scene found in Porter's work.

Porter was determined to paint nature as he found it believing that the landscape had an existence and integrity apart from the human observer. Porter believed the landscape presented a truer picture of reality than one he could invent to express in his art. Paul Cummings pointed out that Porter once told a group of students ". . . that art is not ideal, it's material and specific and actual."⁵ Porter focused on the landscape as one coherent whole and did not concentrate on dissecting the parts. He considered it wrong to evaluate nature and weed out aspects which some might consider unpleasant. Porter aimed to represent reality. Since one cannot be totally objective, as noted by Gombrich,

Porter subjected his personal feelings to an intense discipline. While not allowing himself the more obvious "personalism" of subjective painters like O'Keeffe, Porter still expressed himself by the selections he made from nature. These selections consisted of his choice of images, his use of color, and even his decision to paint objectively. Kenneth Moffett wrote of Porter's approach to nature, "Never did he willfully distort or break with a perceived reality."⁶ What interested him most about nature was experiencing it--not changing it.

An element of great importance to Porter's realistic approach was his use of color, which remains a distinctive feature in his work. It is often delicate, even pale. Porter placed pallid colors next to their complements creating an underlying tension between the colors. Detail in his landscapes was expressed only by an area of color. Critics such as Moffett have noted the importance of color in Porter's work:

He saw his surroundings through the medium of paint and so became a 'painter's painter', admired for the boldness and sensitivity visible in the aesthetic choices especially the handling, color, tone juxtapositions, and weights.⁷

Porter's particular use of colors established the mood for the entire painting. In "Boathouses and Lobster Pots" (1969-1972), his color consists of pale hues that gave a delicate,

tranquil look to his work. The sky was painted in soft, muted grays and yellows that are repeated in the sky, water, boat-house, and lobster pots. His use of yellows and grays suggests warm, lazy, quiet summer days. The local colors create a feeling of stillness, frequently notable in his landscape.

Porter's various techniques all reflect his perception of nature as a thing sufficient to itself, needing no external justification and no improvement. In turn, this perception makes each painting a special instant of discovery, as the artist serves as the medium for revealing a rare or even unique moment in nature. The unending change of nature itself insured that every glimpse of it as landscape would have some distinctiveness, and Porter aimed at revealing these special discoveries.

If viewers readily see a certain "coziness" in his work, at least some observers have detected a kind of abstraction in his technique--or, at least, elements of style more typically associated with the clipped, analytical manner of abstraction. For example Ashberry noted:

. . . the more one looks at them, the less the paintings seem celebrations of atmosphere and moments but rather, strong, contentious and thorny. He painted his surroundings as they looked, and they happened to look cozy. But the coziness is deceiving The painting has the vehemence

of abstraction, though it speaks another language.⁸

What Ashberry meant can be seen in Porter's use of color to define some detail in the landscape and in his manner in applying the medium.

Most important to Porter was that each of his paintings be enjoyed as a whole just as he appreciated nature. Porter respected the natural world and did not wish to alter the images he saw in the landscape by adding personal messages to the content. Porter wanted his work to exist, like nature, with value of its own.

Subjective Interpretation

Georgia O'Keeffe also used nature as inspiration for her work. O'Keeffe's subjectivist interpretation of the landscape gave visual form for her personal feelings about her environment. In contrast to Porter's straight-forward approach, O'Keeffe painted individual elements with precise realism, but then removed them from their context and juxtaposed them in imagined spaces. An example of this approach is found in her painting "Summer Days" (1936). In this painting, O'Keeffe removed the realistically detailed deer's skull from its natural setting and suspended it in space above a desert landscape. Because of the unusual arrangement of the images, the work seems surrealistic. Perhaps the imagery in this painting symbolizes nature's renewal of life. In any case, the work exemplifies O'Keeffe's approach to landscape painting. O'Keeffe wrote:

Objective painting is not good painting unless it is good in the abstract sense. A hill or tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or a tree. It is lines and colors put together so that they say something. For me that is the very basis of painting.⁹

The powerful forms and brilliant light of the desert stimulated her inner vision. These were forms that held personal meaning for O'Keeffe. O'Keeffe did not seek to copy nature but to find the underlying and irreducible forms beyond the details. O'Keeffe's work ranged from the representation of the real to virtual abstraction with little visual relation to actual objects. Lloyd Goodrich wrote about this wide range in O'Keeffe's artistic language from abstraction to realism: "There is no conflict between these two poles of her modes of expression; the same content and the same spirit are in both."¹⁰ The content for both her abstract work and more realistic work was derived from images she saw in the world around her. The spirit which O'Keeffe perceived in landscape was revealed in combinations of natural forms, light, openness, color, and sensitivity. Her vision was to give a highly personal response to the physical realm of desert places as if to isolate the relevant messages from nature as determined by the human observer. Her color was bold and pure, adding strength to her forms. O'Keeffe wrote of color: "The meaning of a word--to me--is not as

exact as the meaning of a color."¹¹ In her paintings, prismatic color was the expressive element used to convey the spirit of the forms.

The subjects of O'Keeffe's work are as varied as her artistic language. O'Keeffe always painted the world around her wherever she happened to be. Her subject matter ranged from the skyscrapers of New York City to the deserts of New Mexico. Unlike Porter, O'Keeffe removed images from their natural settings in order to arrange them in startling juxtapositions of symbolic significance. Her desert and bone paintings are a recurring theme. The bones are central to O'Keeffe's work. Katherine Hoffman observed:

O'Keeffe's use of the word "symbols" is similar to the poetic term "synecdoche", or use of a part to represent the whole. For her the bones as symbols became vehicles to represent her feelings for her beloved desert world.¹²

For O'Keeffe, the bones represented the life of the living desert, not symbols of death. O'Keeffe painted several pictures of the living desert as seen through the hole of a bleached bone. She saw the desert heat and light as the elements which transform the living animal into these intensely clean, clear, bright bones--life transformed as it is in the purifying sacrificial fire.

III. MARILYN THOMPSON, LANDSCAPE PAINTER

My attitude toward landscape painting is based on the combination of both the literal and subjective forms of interpretation. Representational images appear in my paintings, yet there is a highly personal style expressing a distinctly subjective view of nature. I have used nature to express my personal feelings. While Porter aimed to record nature on its own terms, I use nature to explore and express my personal concerns. First, before I make any sketches, I walk outdoors making observations. In my studio, I reflect on my impressions about nature and how humans interact with it. Then, I begin to make sketches from memory based on subjective reaction to what I observed. I seek to alter forms from the natural environment to make them symbols of my personal, spiritual, and emotional reaction to the environment itself. Consequently, my art is true to my perception, rather than to details in the landscapes I have visited.

In my work, as in that of O'Keeffe, I tend to give the visible expression of my personal emotions and experiences, past and present. My work stems from the desire to express sentiments within me, rather than to render nature as Porter tried to do in a strictly objective way. My approach to art is a personal and spontaneous response. As Joyce Cary wrote:

The passage from intuition to reflection, from
knowledge of the real to expression of that know-

ledge in viable form is always precarious and difficult. It is in short, a kind of translation, not from one language into another, but from one existence into another, from the receptive into the creative, from the purely sensuous impression into the purely reflective and critical act.¹³

Instead of literal interpretation of natural scenes, my paintings combine the visible material forms with their invisible inner spiritual counterparts. The landscape is a symbolic repository for my ideas. Nature is used as a device to add concreteness to my paintings. In my landscapes, I use nature as a point of departure for my feelings and fantasies. These fantasies are connected to the raw landscape and its link to humans. I emphasize the tension between humans and nature, linking discord and harmony. I do this by painting areas that represent a storm next to a place of shelter such as a cave. Flam wrote about Matisse's theoretical framework:

. . . nature is the ultimate source of art, and the work of art is a synthesis of imagery perceived in nature and translated, by an act of belief in the artist's own perceptions, into the final image.¹⁴

I use color to create tensions in my painted landscapes. Like Porter and O'Keeffe, color is a very important element in my paintings. My intention is to push color beyond mere decoration. In my paintings, the richness of the color is

strengthened by contrasting areas of low-intensity hues. Brighter colors are painted in the center of the composition while the duller colors are used in the outer areas of the picture. Reds are painted next to greens, and blues are placed next to oranges. My color orchestration is deliberately garish and is not based only on my observation of color in nature. Reds are often painted in areas that represent water instead of the expected blues. Complementary and contrasting colors create energy and tension while strengthening the composition through their placement, intensity, and value. In the painting "Passage" (1987), low intensity colors are used at the outer edge of the work so that the stronger, high-intensity colors can direct the viewer's attention through the cave and beyond the fiery landscape in the distance. The viewer can move visually from the blues at the bottom of the picture up to the bright intense colors at the center of the composition.

The selection of color in my work is conscious and directly connected to the content, possible in part because symbolic meaning has often been attached to certain colors used to paint the landscape. Yellows often represent sunlight while reds represent forces in nature such as fire. Kandinsky commented on the color red:

Red is purposeful power. It has many shades and just as many psychological effects and symbolic meanings.¹⁵

In some of my work, the reds and oranges symbolize a spiritual fire. The firey turbulent areas are contrasted with the soft hues in the painting "Behind the Door" (1986). Creamy colors develop areas of calm contrasting with the firey turbulent areas of red and orange that thrust against the sky creating a dynamic relationship between space and form. In the painting "Fire and Water" (1986), spatial tension is created between the firey background and the cool rushing blue water that bubbles out of the fire into the foreground. Tension also is created by the placement of red and orange under the blue water.

An additional concern in my landscape painting is the precarious relationship between humans and nature. According to Huyghe, ". . . the work of art is grounded in the physical world but comes to full bloom in the world of the spirit."¹⁶ The Symbolists of the twentieth century expressed the idea, as stated by H. H. Arnason, that Symbolism in painting was ". . . the search for a new content based on emotion rather than intellect or objective observation, and on intuition, inner force, and the idea beyond the appearance . . ."¹⁷ Symbolists used certain visible images and expressive elements, such as color, to stand for--or symbolize--inner feelings and emotions. I join other artists in using symbolism to develop a connection between the exterior world and personal interpretations. Symbolism may be varied, even the same element may be used to provoke contradictory feelings in

different paintings. An example of this is how I portray fire in "Passage" (1987). Here the fire is symbolic of the malevolent forces in nature and the cave is a place of refuge from these forces. I make a point of using all four elements in my work--water, wind, fire, and earth. Fire serves as a visual symbol in several ways. First, it is a destructive force devouring the landscape and, second, it makes the fate of humans and nature reciprocal. But the flames are also "expressive," signifying "inner passion, hope and positive force." In my feeling about the impact of fire on us, I recall the words of Alexander Eliot who said, "Reality is Fire, one vast sacrificial fire, in the leaf and in blood and in the stars, one fire."¹⁸ Fire can be a symbol of sacrifice, generating life and hope. An example of this idea is represented in the painting "Private Prayer" (1987). The cave combines symbolic meaning and knowledge of the real. The cave is a symbolic place of refuge, representing a temple, giving protection against the malevolent forces in nature that threaten those humans exposed to its full fury. Here in my work, it is a protective device from evil forces. The cave is symbolic of the spiritual world and the distant landscape seen through the opening in the cave represents the physical world. Instead of including the form of a person in the landscape, I use the landscape to symbolize a person's self-protection against the forces in nature. Some people have a way of protecting themselves from disasters and heart-

ache by turning inward. The self-protection I speak of is the soul, often represented as a cave.

This summer when I visited caves in Missouri, I experienced a sense of enchantment. My connection with nature grew even stronger. I felt secure and protected while climbing into the deep recesses of the earth. It was like another world. The stalagmites were like nature's religious icons found deep in the temple of the earth. Here one could escape the fury of a storm or the heat of the sun. I felt myself a part of nature, no longer alienated from it by our technological society. Coming out of the caves made me feel like I was leaving a very special place. The caves became a place of refuge, an escape from the sometimes threatening forces of nature as well as from our artificial world.

Feelings and impressions are important in my work. The landscape is depicted as a struggle between the inner spirit and one's physical dependence on nature. While physically bound to earth, a person may use the inner spirit to transcend it in thought and imagination. And yet the bond between the spirit and nature is always present. In some of my work, this attachment is symbolized by a white thread that forever connects the spiritual and the physical, or a cave that symbolizes the inner spirit while the distant landscape represents the many forces of nature or the trials and tribulations of life. In my work, nature becomes a symbol for subjective interpretation.

VI. CONCLUSION

The relationship between humans and nature has long been of interest to artists, and the landscape continues to attract many of them as the primary source and focus of their work. In this paper I examined the works of two prominent artists who portrayed the landscape in very different ways. Fairfield Porter recorded nature objectively, attempting to recreate the landscape on canvas just the way he saw it. Georgia O'Keeffe, on the other hand, approached nature subjectively. Her landscape paintings reflected nature as she felt and perceived it, rather than merely as it appeared. Both of these artists painted familiar surroundings, using the landscape of their immediate environment as the subject for their work.

These two artists are of particular interest to me because, in many ways, the portrayal of the landscape in my paintings represents a synthesis of these two different approaches. Like Porter and O'Keeffe, I have a tremendous respect for nature. I tend to agree with Porter's assessment that the landscape is inherently artistic as it appears in nature, and has value of its own. However, like O'Keeffe, when I look at the landscape, I inevitably see more than what is there. My work reflects the process of not only looking at the landscape, but into it. I attempt to incorporate into my paintings the physical world that I see, as well as my reactions to it based upon my emotions and personal experi-

ences. For me, the painting of the landscape represents much more than an attempt to recreate what is there--for it also includes what I feel while I am there. In a sense, my landscape paintings are also self-portraits. They portray the physical world as I see and interpret it, as well as reflecting my inner world as I feel it.

NOTES

¹Alexander Eliot, Sight and Insight, (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, Inc., 1959) 56.

²E.H. Gombrich, The Image and the Eye, (Oxford: Phaidon P, 1982) 28.

³Rackstraw Downes, ed., Fairfield Porter: Art In Its Own Terms, (New York: Taplinger P, 1979) 23.

⁴John Ashbery, et al., Fairfield Porter, (Boston: New York Graphic Society Books, 1982) 11.

⁵Ashbery, et al., 60.

⁶Ashbery, et al., 20.

⁷Ashbery, et al., 38.

⁸Ashbery, et al., 13.

⁹Georgia O'Keeffe, Georgia O'Keeffe, (New York: Viking Press, 1976.) 88.

¹⁰Lloyd Goodrich, Georgia O'Keeffe, (New York: Praeger P., 1970) 15.

¹¹O'Keeffe, 88.

¹²Katherine Hoffman, An Enduring Spirit, The Art of Georgia O'Keeffe, (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984.) 74.

¹³Joyce Cary,, Art and Reality, (New York: Harper and Brothers P, 1958) 27.

¹⁴Jack D. Flam, Matisse on Art, (New York: Phaidon Press, 1973.) 34.

¹⁵Will Grohmann and Wassily Kandinsky, Kandinsky (New York: Harry N. Abrams, n.d.) 89.

¹⁶Rene Huyghe, Art and the Spirit of Man, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1962) 12.

¹⁷H. H. Arnason, History of Modern Art, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977) 79.

¹⁸Eliot, 103.

SOURCES OF PAINTINGS IN THE TEXT

Fairfield Porter, View of the Barred Islands, (The Herbert W. Plimpton Foundation, 1970).

Fairfield Porter, Island Farmhouse, (Private Collection, Cleveland, 1969).

Fairfield Porter, Boathouses and Lobster Pots, (Mead Art Museum, Amherst, Massachusetts, 1968-1972).

Georgia O'Keeffe, Summer Days, (1936).

Marilyn Thompson, Passage, (Artist Collection, Kansas, 1987).

Marilyn Thompson, Behind the Door, (Artist Collection, Kansas, 1986).

Marilyn Thompson, Fire and Water, (Artist Collection, Kansas, 1986).

Marilyn Thompson, Private Prayer, (Artist Collection, Kansas, 1987).

LIST OF SLIDES

Paintings by Marilyn R. Thompson

1. Behind the Door, 1986, acrylic, 18"x24".
2. Discord, 1987, acrylic, 30"x36".
3. Fire and Water, 1986, acrylic, 18"x24".
4. Journey, 1986, acrylic, 18"x24".
5. Looking Beyond, 1987, acrylic, 30"x36".
6. Nature's Religious Icons, 1987, acrylic, 30"x36".
7. Passage, 1987, acrylic, 18"x24".
8. Private Prayer, 1987, acrylic, 18"x24".
9. Repose, 1987, acrylic, 30"x36".
10. The Soul, 1987, acrylic, 18"x24".

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Two quite different twentieth century artists--Fairfield Porter and Georgia O'Keeffe--approached painting from contrasting points of view. The major purpose of this paper is to review these two different attitudes in order to better understand my approach to painting.

Porter focused on the objective rendering of his environment while O'Keeffe emphasized a personal and intuitive response to hers. Porter was a realist in his approach to nature. He sought to avoid forfeiting nature's own special value by imposing messages through his works. On the other hand, O'Keeffe intentionally manipulated images from nature in order to express personal meaning.

As with Porter and O'Keeffe, nature plays a valuable part in my work. It is interesting to note the various attitudes about nature and how these artists used it in their work. I agree with Porter that nature has a value of its own. But like O'Keeffe I also feel the importance of exploring my relationship to nature by adding personal meaning to my works.